Microhistory: Its Critiques

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ABSTRACT

The following short notes argue that a comprehensive history of microhistory can address the critiques that have been levelled at it (pendulum of critiques) over the last five decades but can also showcase the achievements of microhistory during the same period. It points at an under-researched *pre-scientific* history of microhistory (compass of direction) that is worthy of intensive scholarly attention. It also argues 'against the charge of anecdotal antiquarianism…' (Orser 2016: 179).

Key words: micro historical approach, micro historical methods, *pre-scholarly* or *pre-scientific*, Microhistory 2.0.

1. Introduction

The rise of microhistory since the mid-1970s with its high-tide of popularity two decades later in the 1990s (I.M. Szijártó in S.G. Magnússon and Szijártó 2013: 6), continues to make important contributions to the broader histor*ies* and humanities' debates, not only about its own research outcomes (practice), but also about micro historical epistemology (theory). These contributions of microhistory *praxis*, mostly about the unfortunate, forgotten people, and more specifically, of individuals on the lower limits of civic society, are popular study objects that represent the 'normal exceptions' in the web of life.

The generally perceived notion that microhistory is no one-dimensional historical *approach* with its own specific *methods*, makes consensus rare. Herein is a binary of threats, which Szijártó (2018: 917–927) timeously countered.

2. Pendulum of critiques

The 'ever present threat of short-termism' (Guldi and Armitage 2014: 2) is not unique to microhistory but part of a wider problem facing global knowledge and wisdom-seeking efforts – modern-day technological innovations are particularly prone to short-termism. If 'microhistorians are not a homogeneous group who all march to the beat of the same drum' (Magnússon 2020: 134), then such are loaded with research opportunities, instead of being considered as threats. When J.C.M. García (2018: 12) is of the view that '[m]icrohistory is a rather ambiguous term, usually referring to the lives, activities and cultural values of common people, rarely evoke in official source.… Given its imprecise limits, microhistory has the potential of considering virtually anything as a potentially productive subject of research' then ambiguity and impreciseness can at best be contained and not eradicated.

One can 'understand present debates as the rethinking of (or resistance to) the suppositions' (Walker in Hans Renders and Binne de Haan 2014: 43) of traditional thinking. But identifying the limits[1], also of microhistory (in fact, all histor*ies*), specifically identify and explore where the *finis* are not. Accepting, as Descartes (1989: 14) in 1637 suggested, that since '…there is not a single matter […] which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is above doubt…' does not imply that social sciences need to continue to 're-examine their philosophical foundations only during periods of crisis' (Hughes 1987: 1) or that microhistory-critique need to declare a crisis every time when 'the idea of a theory of society conceived with a practical intention' (Habermas 1974: 1) yields a polyphony of micro historical voices.

Consider Hans Renders (in Renders and De Haan 2014: 174) for whom '[t]he ideology of Life Writing – […] is what Life Writing eventually is: an ideology', or Marlene Kadar (in Renders and De Haan 2014: 204–205) who concluded that 'Life Writing as a critical practice […] enhances reading as a means of emancipating an overdetermined "subject", or various subject-locations', then this position gets more complicated because historical perspectives also change over time. Whilst De Haan agrees that microhistory grew from "marxist ideologies" and "changed into a neutral method", Renders & De Haan and De Haan gave no proof for such according to Marijke Huisman (2015: 23). And just in case arguments are raised that microhistory is a-historical and a-scientific since it does not have theoretical foundations, Szijártó (2018: 917) argued the converse: the 'advocates of microhistory have offered several theories to justify its claim of being able to arrive at general conclusions….'

Zoltán Boldizár Simon's (2018: 106) thinking is more complicated than the above critiques. For him it is more difficult to find feasible stories of historical sensibility to act upon, given that Western societies are about to abandon 'a believable story as *the story of history itself*' because since the post-

[1] I propose Szijártó's use of the word *finis* is more descriptive than 'limits'. See István M. Szijártó. 'Probing the Limits of Microhistory', in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47 (1), January 2017, https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-3716638, pp.193–198. [Accessed on 18 October2018.]

Second World War '[t]his new historical sensibility today attests to the impossibility of holding together the constituent of the modern one: action, story form and the belief in a feasible future outcome.' This has far-reaching implications for microhistory because agency, narrative, and goals, are generally accepted as key pillars of microhistory. For Simon (2020: v), human agency – (a pillar of micro historical characteristics) 'have become a natural force that transforms the condition of the Earth system, [that] is at the edge of our understanding'.

It is the same human agency that attempts to employ the micro historical methods to overcome past inadequacies with more than just a pendulum's swing. Because the '…intellectual history of microhistory has not yet been written' (Bernet in Bernet *et al.* 2020: 38, footnote 8), there is no harm in taking the critics of microhistory on comprehensive review – and a proposed way for doing so, is to write microhistory's history.

3. Compass of direction

The word 'microhistory' has been in use *before* it became *microstoria*. I am therefore referring to the *pre-scholarly* or *pre-scientific* period of modern-day microhistory. And when Siegfried Kracauer (1969: 100, 105, 108) wrote about 'smaller units', 'micro facts', 'macro hypothesis', 'micro and macro histories', 'small-scale histories', 'the breakdown of macro entities into their smallest elements', 'micro analysis', 'micro investigations', and numerous similar concepts in the early 1960s – all prefigures today's microhistory.

These are sufficient reasons why a scholarly history of microhistory (including its pre-scholarly phase) is justified. For instance, Kracauer's position between Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and microhistory, is an interesting reason: his close friend Paul Oskar Kristeller (in Kracauer 1969: v), explains that 'Kracauer was an active, but often critical, member of the Institute for Social Research of Frankfurt University and a close personal friend of its directors, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who analysed and taught sociology and other social sciences from a Marxist point of view.'

This becomes clearer if one considers three letters by Horkheimer to Adorno: the first (dated 22 October 1936) reads: 'Through Löwenthal we've repeatedly invited Kracauer to collaborate with us. He has always declined'; the second (dated 14 November 1936) explains: 'To rope Kracauer into any kind of collective undertakings seems highly problematical to me', and the third (dated 8 December 1936), reads: 'I'm sincerely sorry that Kracauer is crazy. I will obviously leave it to you to continue urging him to submit the outline for an essay to us' (Horkheimer 2007: 70, 79, 89).

Final observations: if J.L. Talmon (1962: 243) is correct that Sir Lewis Namier's *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929) is a break from the Whig interpretation of English history and instead 'a fabulously microscopic examination of the composition of the successive Houses of Commons under George III', then so much for a comprehensive history of microhistory. Therefore, 'the dominant mode of historicity' (Mudrovcic 2014: 4) is questioned and might reveal an interesting pre-

microstoria history – this might just as well be an opportune moment to debunk microhistory's relativists who have yet to present an overall philosophy or practical program for microhistory's historiography. In this regard, following Charles E. Orser's (2016: 175–181) constructive treatment, for instance, of microhistory in relation to archaeology, is a fruitful approach that is worthy of a re-read (or two).

Similarly, there is a persistent questioning community that continue to cast doubts on microhistory's strong foundations. Although not directly related to microhistory Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault agree that 'the effective way of making democracy stronger is so strengthen civil society' Flyvbjerg (1998: 201). Whilst this might be true, 'it is easy […] pointing to constitution writing and institutional development as a solution; it is something else to implement specific constitutional and institutional changes' (Flyvbjerg 1998: 228) – but how does all this touch the daily lives of the subaltern people in the very same spaces in society that philosophers think about when the down-and-out recipients are more interested and dependent on a changed and changing web of life for the sake of basic human needs to make it into their next day? In other words, regardless of who takes care of what meta-narratives, microhistory plays an important role through its identifiable *approach* and *methods* to contribute to the understanding of the marginalized in context.

Microhistory enriches the family of histor*ies* in its own unique way regardless of its critiques and there seem no convincing arguments that this will come to an end soon.

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